

Adelaster

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To prevent herself from slipping into another chaotic downward cycle of panicked anxiety, she squashes the rising tide, drops in the toilet her pill-shaped companions, and sizing up her failing reflection, chooses the last-ditch, arduous path left to an imprisoned soul. Knowing her likelihood to fail, she checks herself into a clinic, signs letters of a name—*A-d-e-l-a-s-t-e-r*, then *F-e-r-n-g-u-s*—a name that has lost all meaning to her—and follows as her hosts lead her through rooms that are bright but isolated, where she can hear lonely whispers of dampened despair.

The days at the clinic, it turns out, are much like days anywhere. A routine is established. She gets up. She smiles. She speaks when expected. She eats. She bathes. She goes to bed to get up again.

The therapists tell her she's having breakthroughs. There are moments when she thinks they may be right. She is, after all, able to talk of her father for the first time since his death last year.

The therapists want to know how talking about her father, a famed botanist (as famous as botanists can be), makes her feel. Sad, she says. They want her to explain what sad means. She shrugs, then cringes inside when she sees the disappointment on their faces. She knows that look. She's been the cause of it for him countless times.

As she answers their questions, she sits on chairs and couches, stretches on yoga mats, and walks along the center's bark mulch forest trails. The therapists take turns with her, compare notes, and discuss strategies, trying to find the right degree of pressure to apply to open her up. On a forest-trail walk, the therapist trying to crack her open today, Dr. Stevenson, who insists on being called Rachel, asks her about her mother.

"She died when I was two," Adelaster says.

"How does that make you feel?" Rachel asks.

"Sad."

Rachel nods, and they walk.

“Do you know if your dad and mom were close? Were they happy?”

“He never spoke of her.”

“That could mean anything really.”

Adelaster nods, and they walk.

“What does happiness mean to you, Adelaster?” Rachel asks.

“Not being sad.”

“Could you describe that a little more?”

Adelaster points to a path beyond some trees that seems wider and wilder. “Is that part of the trail?”

“That used to be a road. It was closed some time ago. Not sure why.”

“Where does it go?”

“It dead-ends.”

“That’s probably why it closed.”

“Probably.” Rachel studies the abandoned road. “Would you like to walk it a bit? It doesn’t seem too overgrown.”

Adelaster nods, so they step off the center’s sanctioned path.

“Why did you check into the center?” Rachel asks.

“It felt like the right thing to do,” Adelaster answers, admiring the weeds and flowers that have clawed their way through the forgotten asphalt under their feet.

“When did you start taking valium?”

“I answered that question before.”

“You did. Let me rephrase. Why did you start taking valium?”

“Why does anybody?”

“On the surface it might seem like the reasons are the same. Anxiety. Sleeplessness. But those feelings impact people differently. Why did you feel like you needed help with your anxiety?”

Adelaster shrugs, then looks up and breathes in the forest air.

“Being in the woods is nice, isn’t it?” Rachel asks.

Adelaster nods. After a few more steps, she stops.

“What is it?” Rachel asks.

Adelaster points again, this time to what halted her mid-step. A tree up ahead is devouring a faded yellow sign. The tree’s bark is ingesting the tops of what look to be the letters D, E, A, and D. Below the halfway eaten “DEAD” is “END.”

“The dead-end sign,” Rachel says, stating the obvious. “Nature’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“When a plant does that, it’s called apherctropism.” Adelaster starts walking again. “Sometimes an organism moves away from an obstruction. And sometimes an organism consumes the obstruction.”

“You learn that from your dad?” Rachel asks, following her.

“No,” she says. “I read it in a book. A lot of the books we had were books for my dad’s work, so I know some things about plants.”

“Do you resent him for that?”

“For what?”

“For not teaching you about apher—whatever that was?” Rachel asks.

Adelaster shakes her head. “It was better that way.”

“Why is that?”

“He liked to be with his plants. I liked books. We both got to do what we liked.”

“Is there anything else you like?”

“The quiet.”

Rachel nods, respecting this like of hers for only a few steps more. “Should we turn back? The weeds and grass are getting thick. I didn’t think about ticks.”

“I’d like to see where this road leads,” Adelaster says.

“It dead-ends.”

“Into what though?”

“Okay, we can walk a little more if you answer a question for me.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have any regrets?”

“I’m not sure.” Adelaster thinks about this for a few minutes.

“Everyone has regrets,” Rachel says.

“I wish I never took valium. It’s better not knowing how relaxed you can feel.”

“There are other ways to feel relaxed.”

“So I hear.”

“Looks like the road dead-ends into the woods,” Rachel says. “Let’s turn back.”

Adelaster sighs, thinking even the path less taken led her to more of the same: nowhere to go but back to where she started.

They make their way to the center’s trail again. Rachel asks her questions about her childhood, questions she’s been asked before—what’s her happiest memory? The saddest one? What does she mean her father set up challenges for her?

“He made me read the entire encyclopedia set one summer.”

“Sounds like a productive challenge. And you like to read.”

“I do, but other kids went to camp or spent their days at the pool.”

“What else?”

“He ran experiments all the time.”

“Like what?”

“One week, we only ate white or beige plants. The next, only green. One week, only red. Purple was hard. Eggplant, purple cabbage, purple potatoes.”

“What was the purpose of this experiment?”

“He measured our moods, energy levels, bowel movements, and frequency of urination throughout the day. We felt the best during green week, but toward the end of the week, even that got hard.”

As they walk, Rachel asks more questions, and Adelaster answers them, wishing for some insight to spark, but nothing comes, not until they approach the center, that is, and it isn’t the questions that spark insight then, but rather it’s the appearance of a daytime moon.

Rachel sees her looking up. “Neat, huh? Being able to see the sun and moon at the same time.”

Adelaster nods. “My dad and I were driving once. At night. I don’t remember where we were going. I remember the moon. It wasn’t like this though.”

“How was it?”

“It was a sliver. A crescent. I said that it looked like a giant bit his nail and spat it in the sky. My dad said that was incorrect. He knew why the moon was shaped like it was and explained it to me in detail.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“I can’t remember how it made me feel then, but I know how it makes me feel now.”

“And how does it make you feel now?”

“Sad for him.”

“Why is that?”

“He may have been right, but I like my story better,” she says, and surprising her, her lips push up into the shape of the moon from that night long ago. □